Back From Beyond

By Antoinette May

When Ingo Swann was a small child he would sometimes float from his bed at night, soaring out of his body and slipping into the earth of his native Rocky Mountains where he would follow the veins of metal ore through the ground until they emerged on the mountain surface.

A childhood fantasy? Perhaps. But consider the many today, still floating—only this time at the direction of Stanford Research Institute in Menlo Park.

Again and again, Swann has demonstrated the ability to "see" a distant object without leaving his body. Dr. Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ, physicists at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) call this phenomenon "remote viewing."

Swann calls it out-of-body-experience or OOBE.

Swann's OOBE began in the most common manner, a stress situation. The classic OOBE happens spontaneously during an accident or surgical operation. The individual, generally after being terrified by the prospect of death, is amazed to find himself hovering above his body watching the surrounding activity with a new detachment.

Ingo Swann experienced this phenomenon when he was three years old during a tonsillectomy. Gliding up above his small body, the child watched with fascination as the doctor performed the operation. Hearing the doctor say a forbidden word as his knife slipped brought a sense of shocked pleasure to the small voyeur. Then Ingo Swann says that he looked down his own open mouth and saw blood oozing from the accidental wound. He noted with interest that the doctor placed the tonsils behind two rolls of paper in a side cabinet.

"When I awakened from the anesthetic, I began to cry because my throat had been cut—though I couldn't possibly feel it, everything was numb. The doctor couldn't understand how I knew. Then I asked him for my tonsils. A souvenir was the very least he could do, I thought, but he insisted that he'd thrown them away. I wouldn't let him get away with that! 'No, you didn't,' I contradicted him. 'You put them over there behind those things.'"

From this point on, out-of-body rambles added a dazzling dimension to Swann's life. He grew up, was graduated from Westminster College in Salt Lake City with degrees in art and biology, served three years in the army, and became a critically acclaimed artist. Then, thirty years after his initial experience, Swann volunteered as a subject for a series of controlled experiments demonstrating his unique ability to view remote objects. This was the procedure:

Swann would sit or lie quietly in a cubicle or isolation booth. Several electrodes connected to an EEG were secured to his head. The machine would be disconnected if he moved his head more than minimally—providing proof of a floorbound body. Far above Swann, a small platform was suspended. On the platform, out of sight, were the targets.

Swann's task was to "float up out of his body" and observe the objects. After examining these targets from a point some ten feet above his body, Swann floated down and proceeded to sketch what he had seen.

Short Wolfe

A student gets instructions via headphones in the M-5000 program, designed to help achieve OOBE experiences.

"The classic OOBE happens spontaneously during an accident or operation."

The experiment over, he was unplugged from the machine. A ladder was brought and the targets taken down from the platform. These were then compared to the sketches.

Later both targets and drawings were submitted to an independent judge who correctly matched each copy with its original. At a series of eight such tests conducted by the American Society of Psychical Research in New York all were easily matched. Statistically, this could happen by chance once in 40,000 trys.

Did success spoil Ingo Swann?

No, but it bored him. "One day," he says, "life at SRI reached an apex of boredom." Swann was tired of earthly targets. He'd had enough of objects on platforms or in adjoining labs or even outside the building. He wanted a target that was literally out of this world.

It was March 1973, nine months prior to the scheduled bypass of NASA's Pioneer 10 spacecraft with Jupiter. Swann decided to float up and observe the planet for himself. His own sightings could then be compared to the eventual feedback from Pioneer 10.

To make the experiment even more interesting, Swann invited the psychic Harold Sherman to make the trip with him. The OOBE probe took place on the evening of April 27, 1973. Sherman "took off" from his Mountain View, Arkansas home at eight p.m. Central Standard Time. Swann's probe commenced at six p.m. Pacific Standard Time from SRI. The simultaneous journeys were recorded by Dr. Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ, who recorded the data and then relayed it to scientific colleagues around the country.

The two subjects separated by nearly 2,300 miles described the same things, observed the same environmental conditions on Jupiter. Each spoke of glittering ice crystals, winds of terrific velocity, great mountain ranges and powerful magnetic forces.

The same conditions were later confirmed by the Pioneer 10 probe.

Nearly a year later a similar entrasensory probe was undertaken. This time the target was the planet Mercury. Despite the prevailing theory that the planet would have neither an atmosphere nor a magnetic field, both subjects

continued

insisted otherwise. Scientists evaluating the data obtained by Marina 10 on March 29, 1974—nineteen days after the Swann-Sherman probe — discovered both conditions.

What can Ingo Swann possibly do for an encore?

"The problem lies in finding places that I can't be accused of reading up on, that can still be verified by someone credible," he explains. "There is loose on this planet an anti-psychic attitude. It breeds jealousy. People say, 'Why does he have it and I don't?' It's easier for that kind of mind to simply decide that I don't have it, than to deal with the whys involved."

At the opposite extreme are those who do believe in the OOBE, which they are apt to call "astral travel." Many of these consider Swann's psychic tripping dangerous. "What if someone wants to take over your body?" they ask. "What if you don't come back?"

Ingo Swann believes both possibilities to be unlikely. "Why would anyone want *my* body?" he laughs, but admits, "perhaps some could attract such dangers to themselves by their own paranoia.

"I'll come back, I've lots to do in this life; but an even greater incentive to return to this body is the idea of having to be born again and go to grade school another time. I can't think of any reality worse than that!

"No," Swann replies in anticipation of the inevitable question, "I haven't met God yet, but I've lots to take up with him when I do."

One who thinks the meeting highly unlikely is Dr. John Palmer, a research psychologist at the University of California at Davis. Though Palmer has a love affair going with the OOBE—having devoted six years to its study—he does not see anything mystical about the phenomenon.

"The OOBE should not be regarded as proof of soul survival," he insists. "It may or may not be spiritual, and whether it is or not should be decided by something other than the out-of-bodiness of it."

Approaching the OOBE from the point of view of the experimental psychologist and parapsychologist, Palmer's attitude is one of detachment. "One must consider the psychological set of the person having the OOBE," he says.

"Where is he coming from? What sort of experience was he having just before his OOBE? OOBEs often occur in a death situation. There is this common idea that dying means leaving the body. So what do you suppose that person has in the back of his mind? Maybe something like, 'Gee, I'm dying! What's going to happen next? I go to heaven—at least I hope I go to heaven.' So the person is primed for a mystical experience or OOBE. Perhaps his unconscious mind obligingly comes through with one."

Whether or not an OOBE has an objective reality or is merely a creation of the imagination has yet to be established scientifically. But of one thing Palmer is certain. There is nothing rare about the experience or special about the individual having it.

He cites an experiment undertaken with a colleague in Virginia. Seven hundred questionnaires were sent to adult residents of Charlottesville, Virginia, and to 300 University of Virginia students. Respondents were asked, "Have you ever had an experience in which you felt that you were located outside or away from your physical body; that it, the feeling that your consciousness, mind, or center of awareness was at a different place from your physical body. (If in doubt, please answer 'no')."

Of the 341 townspeople (49 percent) who returned the questionnaire and answered the item, forty-eight (or 14 percent) answered affirmatively. Of the students queried, 266 (89 percent) answered the item and sixty-six of these (25 percent) affirmatively.

In the combined samples, 83 percent of those reporting an OOBE told of having the experience more than once, and 34 percent reported having it eight or more times.

In an effort to stimulate an OOBE in a laboratory setting, Palmer tested some 180 undergraduate students. All were unpaid volunteers and no effort was made to select people with a previous OOBE history. The subjects included seventy-eight men and 102 women. Relaxation and sensory deprivation techniques were employed to induce an altered state of consciousness. As in the case of Ingo Swann, hidden targets were employed.

When the series of experiments was completed, 50 percent of the subjects reported having OOBEs. Evidence of ESP was often prevalent among those reporting OOBEs, but that does not constitute proof that their OOBEs were real in Palmer's opinion. Both OOBEs and ESP are by-products of the hypnogogic state, he believes, a borderline condition between sleep and wakefulness that can be induced by relaxation and sensory deprivation.

The out-of-body experience is just that—an experience. It would be premature indeed, in Palmer's estimate, to conclude that it constitutes a "dry run" for the death experience.

Whatever the prevailing scientific definition of the OOBE, there are many who would like to achieve it, decide for themselves the meaning of it all, and then return to tell the tale. For these cosmic explorers, the ultimate trip can be arranged.

The M-5000 program administered by the Monroe Institute in San Francisco is the vehicle, program director Christopher Lenz the tour guide. Robert Monroe, known in parapsychology circles as Mr. Out-of-Body, has devised the route. Formerly a sound engineer, Monroe's life changed forever nearly twenty years ago when he discovered himself floating some twelve feet above the floor of his bedroom. Directly below was his wife lying in bed with another man.

"'I haven't met God yet, but I've lots to take up with him when I do.'"

Assuming himself to be dreaming, Monroe studied the male form curiously. "Just who would I dream to be in bed with my wife?" he pondered. Then, peering more closely, Monroe says he recognized the man as himself. "I must be dead!" was his terrified reaction. Desperately he swooped down to his body and dove in. Then, feeling the bed below and the covers above, he cautiously opened his eyes and saw the room from a more familiar perspective.

This was the beginning of many such experiences as Monroe discovered that he could leave his body at will. The M-5000 program is an outgrowth of the experiments that followed. It involves a weekend workshop where participants spend most of their time in sleeping bags, stereo headphones clamped to their heads.

The stated purpose of the program is to enable each participant to become aware of the threshold state between wakefulness and sleep, then to stabilize this threshold to such an extent that it becomes a gateway to new means of thought and perception. Quite often this takes the form of an out-of-body experience.

The workshop begins Friday evening and continues through Sunday noon. A minimum of eleven forty-five minute tapes are heard. Each is designed to develop perceptual abilities by careful coordination of instructions from Monroe, combined with varying frequencies of audio pulsing.

Between tapes there's a break for discussion of experiences. Most attend the program hoping for an OOBE but this is generally just the beginning. Some participants report talks with long dead loved ones, others tell of self-healing or telepathic communication. But greater than any of these wonder tales is a sense of guidance and perspective from an apparently heightened consciousness.

Christopher Lenz suggests that those attending the workshop bring not only pillows and blankets (to keep the body comfortable on the floor while the spirit soars) but questions and problems for which outside help is desired. Ingo Swann might say the answers come from the cosmos. John Palmer would suggest the individual's subconscious mind. Lenz frankly does not know where the answers come from. It is enough for him that they invariably come.

"We like to make those distinctions, neatly labeling everything that comes our way into either/or categories," he points out. "Maybe this is more a matter of both/and."

An enthusiastic "graduate" is psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*, who referred to the training session one year later as a wonderful and consistent method of exploring and understanding one's total self. "It has helped broaden my understanding not only of life here, but of that existence beyond what we call death," she said.□